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## “CHILDREN OF NATURE” IN FICTION

It was about the middle of the 18th century that Rousseau told the pretty and baseless fable of the “State of Nature”—a condition of things alleged once to have prevailed everywhere upon earth. At that distant age, if Rousseau might be believed, people were as uncivilized as cattle and as lovable as seraphs. Immediately his admirers began a search for still surviving exponents of this delightful mode of life. Marie Antoinette invited village children to lunch ; ladies of the steepest social eminence dreamt of flirtations with cannibals and negroes, and, for want of the genuine thing, contented themselves with smirking at Benjamin Franklin who was supposed to represent a very primitive set of men. Young girls tied pink ribbons about the necks of snowwhite lambs and led them along the sidewalk, thrilled to their inmost soul with the consciousness of their own supreme innocence. Their less mobile mothers strove for kindred results by having their hair-dresser fasten upon their heads, with trembling wires, flocks of dolls fashioned as shepherds, shepherdesses, and sheep. To attain the proper idyllic effect, no trifling preparations were needed—it often took hours to arrange just one single head. This was bothersome, and precluded a constant indulgence in these revelries of rusticity. But for state occasions such bucolic bedizenment remained long indispensable. In small towns with but one hair-dresser ladies were often compelled to have their heads put in shape twenty-four hours, or more, before one of those great social functions for which all persons of quality must needs turn out. As it was out of question to lie down with a moderate-sized dairy farm in one’s locks, the crinal artist in attendance finished his duties by placing a sort of cage over his customer’s head which enabled her to lean back in an armchair and thus, perhaps, get some semblance of rest.

It should not be surmised that this valiant campaign for pastoral innocence was all in vain. True, it may not have eradicated all vicious hankerings from the human make-up, but of the seeds which it lodged in it, some have to this day not ceased

giving fruit. To the era of Rousseau may be traced the fashion for women to deck out their hats with those clusters of fruit, flowers and cereals, which ever since make their appearance periodically as often as the more sanguinary predilection for killed parrots and pigeons is allowed for awhile to subside. And contemporaneously with the milliners did the story-tellers begin to repair to the bosom of nature for inspiration. A demand arose for savages, peasants, and other "Children of Nature," in fiction. The Swiss painter and author, Gessner, partly supplied the want with his "Idyls" in which Dresden shepherds make love to shepherdesses of the same dainty material. There had been stories before Gessner in which the characters masqueraded as village folk, but they had scored no great success and are said to have been far more insipid than his—a statement rather hard to credit. At any rate, Gessner was the first to push the country tale to the front. He may be called the Ian Maclaren of his age. The colossal favor enjoyed by his now forgotten stories partook to a certain extent of the edifying character of a religious revival: Madame Dubarry shed torrents of tears over their pages. Other writers exhibited manikins dressed up as American and African aborigines. Goethe, however, granted the readers of his "Werther" some glimpses of village life, fresh, strong and bold. But the taste for what is still here and there called falsely "the idealization of nature" was allowed to prevail long in literature.

Only the methods for gratifying this taste might vary. While the majority of those approaching illiterate and untidy people with pen and paper were determined to find them more virtuous than such as had suffered the disadvantage of frequent baths and a liberal education, some of the writers usually classed as romanticists cherished widely different desires. It was not precisely childlike virtue that Hugo and Mérimée were after when they let their imagination stray in quest of subjects to Spain, Corsica, and even the West Indies and Africa. To them the untrammelled play of savage instincts was then the one thing of all-absorbing interest.

There is every reason to be thankful for some of the stories which these literary tourists brought home. But the constant

ringing of variations upon one and the same theme never fails to become trying to the nerves. The yell of Hugo's Bug-Jargal or of Mérimée's Tamango is apt to weary the reader just as much as the cooing of Gessner's Inkle and Yariko. Both kinds of authors met in viewing Nature's Children *from without*. Whether the cry be: How touchingly innocent! or, How beautifully ferocious!—it is the cry of outsiders in pursuit of new sensations, with no serious intention of removing the picturesque trappings to examine the live men and women whom they hide. It took all but a century for writers of fiction consciously to come around to more sober views, more searching methods.

An early start in this direction had been made by Maria Edgeworth in her Irish tales, studied admiringly long after by Ivan Tourgiénieff. But in the early part of the century, their gentle voice was drowned in the din of the romantic novel as fashioned by Scott. Not that Scott, who admired Miss Edgeworth, altogether disregarded her example. His large-hearted hospitality extended to all classes; even gypsies and beggars were welcomed at his lordly mansion. But for the most part these people serve as romantic *staffage* only; with very few exceptions they are placed outside the circle of knights and dames in which centres the main interest. In "The Heart of Midlothian" the contrast between Jeanie's artlessness and the polished wiles of courtlife is lovingly dwelt on, but Jeanie is a child of nature only by half, Scotch Presbyterianism, which had very little to do with nature, claiming the other half. The determination to turn one's back on civilization and all its deeds has seldom manifested itself unambiguously in English fiction of the nineteenth century. The author of "Oliver Twist" insisted that he told the stern truth about his thieves for wise purposes of social and moral reform. Whereupon Thackeray promptly vouched that some of Dickens's thieves were bathed in rosewater, and that the only unadulterated brand of rogues would, for equally wise purposes, be on exhibition in "Catherine." Whichever statement was the more trustworthy, in either case the intention was the glorification of modern civilization through the unmasking of its enemies.

It is in George Borrow's ill-made and fascinating books —

may one call them novels? they rather form a genre by themselves of which they, not unfortunately, are the sole representatives—it is in "Lavengro" and "The Romany Rye" that one meets an unfeigned delight in the sayings and doings of all sorts of untaught people. "Lavengro," says the author, "is the history . . . of one of rather a peculiar mind and system of nerves, with an exterior shy and cold, under which lurks much curiosity, especially with regard to what is wild and extraordinary." This is true, and the pages of Borrow's books which relate how that curiosity got its fill, retain an abiding charm. He compels attention when recording his talks with gypsies, tinkers, or ex-convicts, because he speaks with spontaneous sympathy, if not, perhaps, with very penetrating divination. Probably the scholarly Mérimée was justified in smiling at some of Borrow's statements, as he does in "Carmen." Borrow is never more entertaining than when engaged in his philological courting of Isopel Berners, the workinghouse girl, whom he in vain tried to make repeat *hntam*, I rejoice, *hntas*, thou rejoicest, *hnta*, he rejoices—in vain, because Belle thought the Armenian words sounded more like the neighing of horses than the language of human beings—while she did at last consent to say: *siriem zkiez*, which, unknown to her, meant as much as: I love you!

Altogether, Borrow's books are as rambling and disjointed and pedantic as if the very Jean Paul had had a finger in their making, and it may well be doubted if they will long preserve even such limited vitality as the best of Jean Paul's writings still possess. If they do, the gypsies and Isopel Berners may claim the credit for it.

One would think that, of the whole world, the spot for idyllic writers to abound would be the United States in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, when even the cities had aborigines in blankets at their outskirts, and the still more fortunate settlers in forests and prairies could meet them in their warpaint and have occasions for close personal contact in more or less agitated encounters. Chateaubriand's René did indeed enjoy some interesting experiences with savages both gentle and fierce. And Cooper owed much of his success to Uncas and Chingachgook. Afterwards it was for awhile customary to decry these as unduly

idealized, and one will always have to admit that, while illuminating the red man's admirable traits, Cooper left his inevitable failings comparatively in the shade. Yet of late sober students of anthropology no longer deny a considerable degree of truth, scientific truth so to speak, to Cooper's pictures. As for their poetical value, no one ever thought of denying that. His cruder followers, as Bird, seemed to need the Indian only as an agent in wholesale massacre, whether he himself did the butchering, or somebody else butchered him.

A new departure in the presentation of aborigines was made by Herman Melville, the author of "Typee," "Omoo," etc. Are these books fiction? Should their author at all be mentioned among novelists? I think he calls for at least a passing notice because, however much or little conscious selection, arrangement and coloring, his fascinating books really contain, some there is beyond a doubt—enough to make them links in that chain between autobiography and fiction which holds not a few of the choicest literary gems. "Typee" especially obtains an artistic unity from the recurrent and increasing misgivings of the author as to whether his kindly and amiable hosts intend ultimately to eat him, and for his final happy escape. The novelty of the treatment—as compared for instance with Cooper—is a greater simplicity, a firmer determination to rely solely upon resources inherent in the character and peculiarities of the savages, a willingness to take these precisely for what they shall gradually prove themselves to be through intercourse with the white man. The author successfully communicates to his readers a reflection of that feeling of happiness which pervades the valley of "Typee," a spot on which, in his own words, "the penalty of the Fall presses very lightly." By degrees, almost insensibly, one glides in his company into Nature's embrace, comes to look upon her and her children with undimmed primitive eyes. The style of these books, once so unreservedly admired, seems not wholly flawless at present; thus the constant use of terms as "nymphs" and "sylphs" for the native girls is to a modern taste unpleasant. It is on such minor points that a later Frenchman, Pierre Loti, who in sundry respects appears a reincarnated Melville, easily surpasses him. But the American sailor's fresh-

ness of feeling, his uncommon blending of delicacy with blunt manliness, secure him forever a unique position in the world's literature.

Melville founded no school in his country's fiction. For a long time after, such Americans as dealt with primitive existence, did so with no set purpose of rejuvenating literature and man through sojourns on virgin soil. It is preeminently in German fiction that this tendency has been obvious. It has caused the production of some excellent stories which will never die, a heap of mediocrity, and some volumes of a badness so surpassing, so colossal, so ravishing, that it still attracts attention by glowing through the dark vapors which surround the abode of eternally doomed books. Such are the stories of H. Clauren which were devoured by people who had read "Hermann and Dorothea" and "The Heart of Midlothian" fresh from the publisher's hand. Next to extraordinarily good books, nothing makes such instructive reading as extraordinarily bad ones, provided they were popular in their day. No books worse than Clauren's ever had so great a success, for never were worse books made. Reclam's publishing firm in Leipzig has done nothing more meritorious than the inserting of "Mimili" in its "Universal-Bibliothek." It requires but a modicum of brains to reprint Goethe and Shakespere, but nothing short of the rarest literary tact would suggest a republication of "Mimili." Now that it is there and may be had for 20 pfennig, no lover of literature who knows German can afford to miss the opportunity of making its acquaintance. Read it, read twice such passages as that where the hero and Mimili, the alpine shepherdess, feed each other with cake, she snapping "like a carp" with her dazzling white teeth after his fingers—and meditate on the fact that such reading was the delight of unnumbered thousands not very long ago. There is a lesson here in humility, caution, and other useful virtues.

Clauren's "Mimili" had not yet ceased to exercise her charm through continued new editions (which among other things kept the public informed of the increase of her household in the way of babies) when another author's individuality began slowly to assert itself through dramas and novels, the latter of which mingled reminiscences from Goethe with mannerisms caught in the

company of Jean Paul. Immermann's novels would now be buried, had not the bright man that he really was, woven into one of them, "Münchhausen," a series of pictures of Westphalian peasantry. The weaving is rather awkwardly done, but the pictures are good. Immermann enlightens us through the mouth of one of his characters as to the principles which guided his hand in the making of them. He did not intend to pose as the eulogist of idyllic rusticity, as Le Vaillant eulogized the virtues of the Hottentots at the expense of European civilization. What he contemplated was to help a generation, possessed with morbid hankerings, to a clearer perception of the fundamental characteristics of mankind and, consequently, its only indispensable needs. Among the peasants sound relations between the sexes still prevailed; what counted with them was not talk, but the accomplishment of one's apportioned work. "Watch the rejoicing at wedding feasts and shooting matches, and tell me honestly if you believe that fun will cease from earth as soon as the peevish youth of the present era predicts? There are idlers, bad marriages and wicked wives here as well as in the cities, but they are called by their right names. That compound of ennui and gush which is fashionable in society's ruling classes will remain ever unintelligible to the root and trunk of the community." (Münchhausen, book II, ch. 10, *passim*).

The polemical sting which Immermann still aims at the higher classes, was not found in Berthold Auerbach's first "Village Tales." If Auerbach considered society in need of a tonic, he said it not in so many words, but tendered his assistance in the guise of tales that seemed, and perhaps were, little more than real events remembered and retold. "Tolpatsch," "The Hostile Brothers," "The Warpipe," "Genovefa,"—some of these are humorous, some terribly sad, but nowhere is society in general, nor any particular section of it, held up to ridicule or indignation. Yet a discerning eye could not fail to detect that the author was not quite so naïve as would appear at first blush. He easily fell to musing, liked to speak his musings aloud, and to give them a didactic twist. In one story he told how two brothers quarrelled over the division of their late parents' property and in the end carried the matter into court, where it was



decided that everything must be sold and the proceeds divided between the brothers. Thus these had to buy back their own beds and other furniture. Anent which Auerbach observes :

"There are in every house many things which no stranger is able to buy for money ; they are worth much more than could ever be paid for them, because thoughts and memories cluster round them which to outsiders signify nothing. Such objects should be passed on quietly from generation to generation, for only thus would their inherent value be kept unimpaired. But if one must tear them out of other people's hands, or purchase them for money, their original exclusive character is to a great extent lost. They are obtained for what they are worth in cash, not inherited in silence, as, one might say, something sacred."

The truth of this is incontrovertible, but who would not prefer to have it stated in fewer words and, if possible, not by the author himself? But lapses of this kind, which were comparatively scarce in Auerbach's earliest stories, became more and more frequent as his reputation and self-confidence grew. A faithful disciple of Spinoza and Goethe, he was not satisfied to relate events pure and simple, he must needs present them in their "eternal aspect." The intention is laudable, but there are other, more artistic ways of realizing it, than sermonizing. Auerbach was the most bewildering compound of a poet—a lyrical poet at that—a psychologist, and a lay preacher, that ever invaded fiction. And as such we must take him. Criticism, which once chanted hymns of praise at the very mention of his name, later grew unduly ill-humored at his failings. They are there, to be sure, but in his best work they are more than outweighed by his great and rare virtues. If there was a touch of the ludicrous in Auerbach's freely expressed delight at his own acute observations, there was also something touching, because the man's sincerity shone out so resplendently. There are so many conceited fools in this world, that one may afford to judge with leniency a man whose self-satisfaction rests on a solid foundation. If some of his sayings are sure to provoke us, he rarely fails to make amends by words which give pure and lasting enjoyment. Black Marann, the poor widow in "Little Barefoot," whose son John has run off, is undoubtedly too eloquent for her bringing up, but

one is willing to overlook it for such a charming psychological morsel as this :

"Black Marann rarely attended religious services, but she liked to have somebody else borrow her hymnbook. It gave her a peculiar satisfaction that the book was in church, and she was particularly pleased when a mechanic from another town, who was working in the village, came and borrowed John's hymnbook for the same purpose ; it seemed to her as though her John were praying in the church of his home, because the words were read and sung from his book " . . .

Or even for this beautiful metaphor :

"Marann's talk was at once wild and shy ; it ventured forth only in the twilight, as the game in the forest."

There are matters that one may always count on finding treated in a masterly manner by Auerbach. Crabbedness, greed and unwarranted pride, taint all classes, but their manifestations differ according to the surroundings, and no one ever hit off more shrewdly and nicely than the author of "Diethelm of Buchenberg" and "Florian and Crescentia" those peculiar to farmers and peasants. In the first chapter of "Ivo, the little Priest," we see as through a window the springing up in the little boy's soul of a desire to become a priest, like him at whose first mass he has just been present : with sincere, though vague reverence and enthusiasm mingles an ambitious longing for self-assertion.

It is a pity that the remainder of "Ivo" is not up to the level of the opening. There is a farmhand, Nazi, an unconscious prophet of pantheism, who is neither probable nor pleasing. An author with such a philosophical itch as Auerbach could not long remain contented with the task of the story-teller pure and simple. Henceforth we have much to endure in his pages from characters embodying and preaching the doctrines of Spinoza so dear to the author's heart. They are either schoolteachers, scholars (as the collaborator in "The Professor's Wife") or village people born and bred, but whether or not they have come by their wisdom legitimately, they remain a set of bores.

Besides Spinoza two great writers shared the sway over Auerbach's soul : Scott and Goethe. It was the former that first

stirred in him a desire to write fiction, and although he fortunately never wrote those historical novels which he now and then contemplated, he rendered abundant evidence of the hold Scott had acquired upon his imagination. The sublimest of all Scott's characters, Jeanie Deans, is the mother of ever so many of his clever village women from Lorle to Valpurga, the crown-prince's nurse. It is no small compliment one pays these women by saying that their ancestress would be proud to acknowledge them.

Goethe's influence is more apparent in Auerbach's novels (of which it is not here the place to speak) than in the country stories, although "Little Barefoot" has a distinct flavor of "Hermann and Dorothea."

Auerbach's "Village Tales"—the word *Dorfgeschichten* was coined for their titlepage—gained more readers than any other German book since "Werther." They once more made peasants fashionable. In their wake followed unnumbered German stories, of which the most original were by Otto Ludwig and the two Austrians, Anzengruber and Rosegger. They constituted one of sundry factors in the development of Ivan Tourgiénieff (see his preface to the Russian translation of Auerbach's "The Villa on the Rhine") and probably of Björnstjerne Björnson; their success may also have suggested similar experiments to George Sand. These three names are identified with still weightier achievements than any which Auerbach could boast, but only Tourgiénieff differed essentially from the others, and from Auerbach, in his treatment of rustic characters. His "Diary of a Sportsman" exemplifies an advanced stage of the evolution of the genre. Although the author confessedly planned these sketches as a means to promote the emancipation of the Russian serfs, he was too thorough an artist not to become so absorbed in the characters and situations that he avoided in their reproduction every trace of exaggeration, all suggestion of whitewash and varnish. *From a device to shame corrupt civilization, the village tale had become in the hands of Auerbach a pretext, or at any rate a text, for benevolent pantheistic discourse; Tourgiénieff finally set its aim entirely within its own limits.*

A writer older than Tourgiénieff, the Swiss pastor, Albert Bit-

zius, whose pen name was Jeremias Gotthelf, had made the same transition, although he too wrote with a view to reform — reform from within of the villages. Bitzius knew, perhaps, the psychology of the peasant better than any other novelist, and when the poet in him got the best of the moralist, the result was such delightful things as “Elsi, the Strange Maid” or “The Broom-maker from Rychiswyl.” Bitzius could joke, but when he was in earnest, he was terribly so, and called not only a spade, but anything else in the country, by its plain, everyday name. And there is simply no telling what one may come across in the country! In “Poor Kate,” and the still bolder “How Five Girls Perished from Brandy,” this orthodox protestant pastor used language not a whit more polished than that which many years after caused such an outcry against the novels of Zola and his pupils. This was one of the reasons which for a long while limited so narrowly his public and his influence. In European literature his position is not to be compared with Auerbach’s, but his production is a significant phenomenon as showing *the inevitable drift of the village tale towards naturalism*.

Bitzius wrote exclusively of peasants; others, mentioned above, did their most important work in other realms. It has not been my intention here to contemplate all the pictures of Nature’s Children in the fiction of the nineteenth century, nor to treat exhaustively, or even enumerate, all the authors who have had a share in their making. So exquisite a writer as Pereda, for example, is studied most profitably in connection with other novelists of his own nation. Nor might this essay advantageously be extended by an estimate of those young American novelists who of late have raised anew the cry of “return to nature!” The most remarkable of these, Mr. Jack London, reveals obvious points of kinship with Mérimée, but both in his work, and in that of Mr. Stewart Edward White—to mention the only one whose force approaches Mr. London’s—certain new elements prevail so distinctly, that a separate examination would be needed to render it justice.

My reason for grouping together the books just discussed, has been to throw light upon a tendency, or, better, perhaps, an instinct, which at intervals manifests itself in fiction, now to scant

purpose, now again with praiseworthy results. When all that is effected amounts but to the substitution of poppies on ladies' hats for plumes, literature is no better for the effort. But often authors have gone to people with a minimum of polish, because they were tired, *not so much of the polished classes themselves, as of the set formulas according to which these had to be portrayed in literature, and which the authors lacked the power to break.* Human nature remains essentially the same, beneath silk as beneath homespun, but it disports itself more freely under the latter covering. A sojourn among the children of nature may help to sharpen your perception of what is essential, and what fortuitous, in your fellow beings. After thus bracing themselves, the more ambitious literary artists as a rule return to the richer field of civilized humanity. The village tale may be defined as the vacation trip of modern fiction.

JOAKIM REINHARD.

Front Royal, Virginia.